A Crisis In NATO On Missiles

By Nick Eberstadt and Tom Ricks

WASHINGTON — Relations between the United States and Western Europe may seem bad today but they are likely to be vastly worse a year from now, as NATO governments tremble and even fall under the weight of a divisive issue that can no longer be postponed: Euromissiles.

This has been most evident in the Netherlands, where one crucial issue in Wednesday's parliamentary election was NATO's nuclear-missile plans. Several times in recent years, it has taken the Dutch months to form coalition cabinets, and these have survived only by dodging the missile issue. A new cabinet conceivably could do the same.

Today's "crises" — the Soviet natural-gas pipeline, the NATO budget — are neither unfamiliar nor fundamentally threatening to the alliance. When the world economy sickens, recriminations over trade policy occur. When sovereign states coordinate and finance a common defense program, they are sure to squabble over details.

But 1983 promises to bring a crisis of a different, as yet unrecognized sort. The alliance will be threatened by the planned deployment of the Euromissiles — a new round of medium-range nuclear weapons — in five North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries.

The decision to install them dates to 1979, when NATO's European contingent, led by West Germany's Chancellor, Helmut Schmidt, and including even the Dutch, asked the United States to place the new weapons in Europe. Under the plan, 112 cruise missiles would be installed in Italy, 160 in Britain, 48 each in Belgium and the Netherlands. West Germany, NATO's forward line, was to take not only 96 cruise missiles but also 108 of the more destructive Pershing 2's. Unless Moscow made deep cuts in its nuclear arsenal targeted at Europe, deployment was to begin in December 1983.

The purpose of Mr. Schmidt's proposal, it seems, was threefold: to provide a counterbalance to the Soviet Union's theoretical advantage in a land war in Europe; to pressure the Russians into serious arms-reduction negotiations at least in their European theater; and, most importantly, to demonstrate, to America and others, Western Europe's military solidarity even as trade with the Soviet bloc expanded.

Of these assumptions, only the first — the military-counterbalance argument — has not been disproved, for it can be tested only in combat. Clearly, Moscow has not made the desired cuts; until the end of 1981, the Red Army added steadily to its nuclear strike force poised against Europe. The American-Soviet talks on mutually balanced reductions of forces in Europe started late and are yielding little.

The miscalculation about Western Europe's response to the initiative appears to have been the worst of all. By this time next year, the missile decision probably will have become a symbol of Western disarray. Mr. Schmidt has placed his own neck in a political guillotine: The odds that his coalition can survive the Euromissile vote he must call are slim. It is conceivable that the Dutch and Belgian Governments will fall on the issue as well. Not even Britain and Italy should be presumed safe from shock waves created by parliamentary debate on local stationing of new, United States-operated nuclear missiles.

Yet a single round of electoral defeats will not resolve the problem. Even if the necessary resolutions were to pass the five requisite parliaments, bitter and enduring struggles would be set off in at least a few countries, deeply dividing NATO. If even one government avoided this vote, or moved to reconsider installation (Belgium already has delayed its decision to honor the pledge for two years in a row), the political viability of maintaining a united defense of Western Europe would be called into doubt. Washington would be forced to ask whether America can go forward in alliance with prosperous countries that are unwilling to take responsibility for their own defense. Thus, the elements of a fundamentally new sort of crisis seem to be falling into place.

In this particular crisis, time is on Moscow's side. Simply by waiting, Moscow can expect to see its principal adversaries fall into confusion. Its fondest international hopes are for a neutralized West Germany and a disgruntled, isolated America. Such dreams are far from being realized but are no longer simple fantasies.

There is little Washington can do to improve chances for approval of the missiles, and as the Administration has unerringly demonstrated, there is much that can be done to reduce them. Intemperate threats, high-handed gestures and loose talk about nuclear war will not strengthen the mettle of our allies or Western democracy. The Euromissile crisis will require extraordinary self-control, patience and delicacy; unfortunately, these are not characteristic American virtues.

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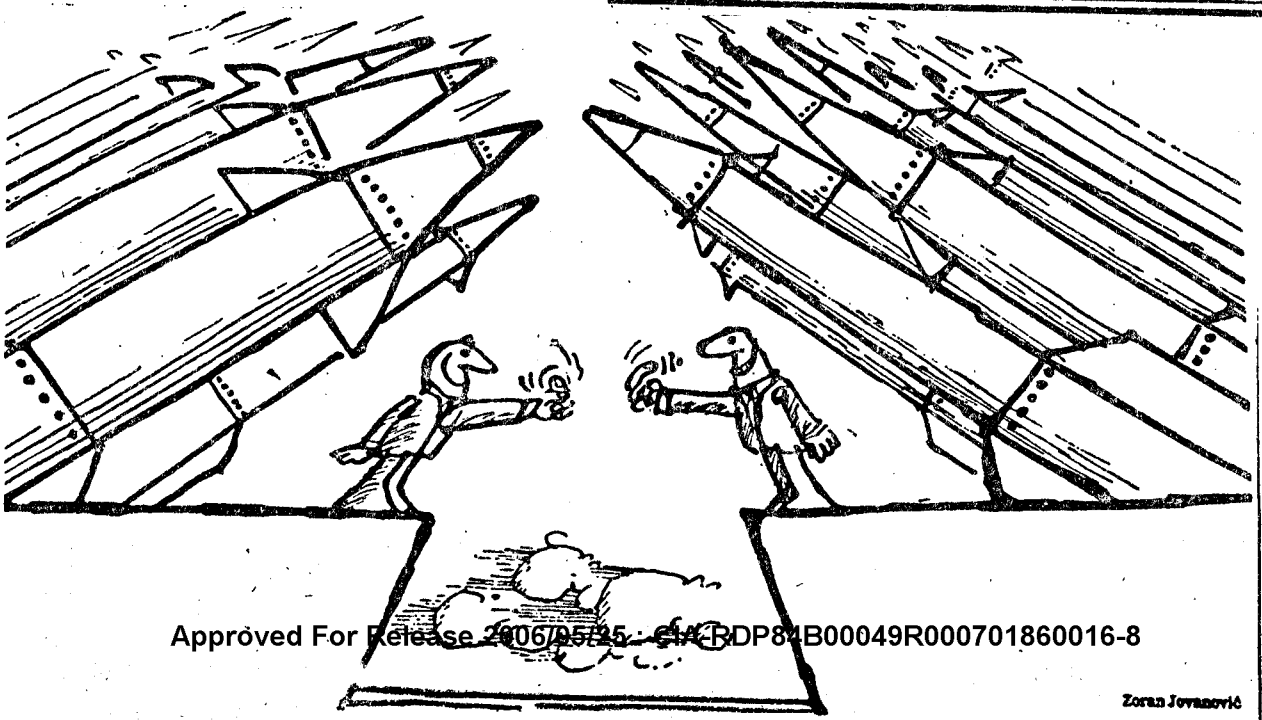
THE NEW YORK TIMES, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 1982



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